

Opening Remarks at the

## Meeting of Democrats

Board Room, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor, IDRC

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Maureen O'Neil

President, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for setting time aside today to join us for this exciting discussion. My name is Maureen O'Neil and, for those who don't know me, I am the President of the International Development Research Centre. (*Ad lib. in French*)

As a research organization, IDRC argues that the ability of citizens to think freely, express opinions, and debate public policy issues directly are central elements of a strong democracy.

Today, we have the opportunity to think critically and speak candidly about how external actors, diplomats, and donors fit into the landscape of democratic change around the world. We have the rare pleasure today to enjoy the company of remarkable people who have experienced this firsthand. Let us for today abandon our assumptions – as they are only assumptions – that external democracy support is necessarily helping to promote democracy. Indeed, we too often rely on conventional wisdom, rather than sound evidence, to inform our decisions, particularly in this field of support for democracy. Too many of the questions to which we now seek answers lack sound research data. What makes a democracy support project constructive, rather than interventionist? Where does one draw the line between independence and interference? And when does well-meaning outside support put democratic activists in more danger of reprisal? Consider this an invitation to speak openly and critically about what donors can and cannot realistically achieve.

First I will introduce our special guests. *His Excellency Ricardo Lagos*, former President of Chile, founder of the Fundación Democracia y Desarrollo, and United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Change: welcome.

*Saad Eddin Ibrahim* is an equally strong voice on behalf of democracy and human rights. He has been imprisoned for it. The founder and chair of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, he is also Secretary General of the Egyptian Independent Commission for Electoral Review and a member of the Club of Rome.

Next, I am pleased to introduce *Janice Stein*, a professor of conflict management and director of the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. Ms. Stein is internationally renowned for her knowledge and expertise on the Middle East and political conflict.

[We also welcome *John Githongo*, one of Africa's most distinguished advocates for transparency and good government. As Kenya's leading corruption fighter, he exposed large-scale government fraud in Kenya. Now an IDRC Fellow, Mr. Githongo is sharing his expertise with the Parliamentary Centre and Queen's University in Canada.] *[Awaiting confirmation from Tim that Mr. Githongo will NOT be coming.]*

*Theary Seng* is the executive director of the Center for Social Development in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. She has written about her life under the Khmer Rouge in her memoir, *Daughter of the Killing Fields*, and this past September was the first person to file a civil party application to the criminal proceedings against Nuon Chea, charged with crimes against humanity. Welcome, Ms. Seng.

*Aziz Hakimi* is executive director of The Killid Group (TKG), an Afghan media company dedicated to improving public access to independent media, and information. A committed human rights activist, he was instrumental in the creation of Afghanistan's first independent Human Rights Commission.

Next, I am pleased to introduce you to *Rima Khalaf Hunaidi*, the highly-regarded architect of the award-winning series, the *Arab Human Development Report*, published by the UNDP. She is now the chair of its Advisory Board, and also serves as chair of the UN's Global Democracy Fund Advisory Board.

*Alan Hirsch's* distinguished public service career with the Government of South Africa began when he joined the Department of Trade and Industry more than a decade ago. He is now the Deputy Director-General in The Presidency.

And finally, *Thomas Carothers* is the Vice President for studies – international politics and governance – at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. A leading authority on democratization worldwide, he also oversees the Democracy and Rule of Law project, which he founded, and the Middle East program at the Endowment.

Welcome, all. We look forward to sharing the day with you.

I would like to quickly review with you the agenda for the day. The substance of our discussion will take place over two main sessions. Each of the sessions will begin with an introduction from one of our commentators, followed by a tour de table of participants and discussion. We will then have a short break, and invite our observers around the room to join the discussion through a question and answer session.

I should also say of word of explanation regarding the camaras you see around the room. As an output from today, we are creating a short video highlighting some of the main thoughts and debates that come out of the discussion. The video will be featured on our website.

With that, I will pass the floor to Thomas Carothers to begin our first session.